BATMAN: THE MAN WHO LAUGHED

I Started a Joke...

Holmes and Moriarty. Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. Beowulf and Grendel. Van Helsing and Dracula.

Literature and mythology is filled with avatars of good and evil engaged in perpetual battle. Add to that list one more pair of unyielding adversaries: Batman and the Joker.

From his earliest years as a superhero, Batman has been haunted by the grinning villain who mocks his struggle to make Gotham City a better, safer place. Over the years, we've seen the Joker's origins and learned how h is existence is inextricably linked to Batman. But what drives the Joker? And how does Batman feel when faced when such incomprehensibly maniacal evil? Those are questions that writer *Ed Brubaker* and artist *Doug Mahnke* explore in ***Batman: The Man Who Laughed,*** a prestige-format one-shot.

According to Brubaker, ***The Man Who Laughed*** is "as much an exploration of Batman as it is of the Joker, really. It's about watching Batman react to his first true nightmare bad-guy. This is the first Joker story, so it's about Batman realizing his fight isn't just going to be against muggers and murderers, but against freaks in costume whose motives he won't always be able to understand. And at the same time, this is a story about Gotham, too, and how the city reacts to the Joker's initial appearance, which is sort of a more extreme version of how New York reacted to Son of Sam."

If the title sounds familiar... well, it should. ***Batman: The Man Who Laughed*** is an insider's nod to Joker history. "The Joker was partly inspired by a movie called ***The Man Who Laughs*** [a 1928 film starring Conrad Veidt, whose death-rictus grin in that role is supposedly the visual inspiration for the Joker's appearance]. So, since this is the first Joker story, it seemed appropriate to name it after that inspiration," Brubaker said.

Brubaker is no stranger to the Dark Knight, having written the Batman's flagship series previously, as well as having offered a cop's-eye view of Gotham City in the pages of ***Gotham Central,*** which has been praised for its gritty real-world approach. Will he bring that same attitude to ***The Man Who Laughed,*** or is this a more traditional superhero story? "I don't know if my approach is honestly that 'real world' or more than any other writer," Brubaker said. "What I try to do is understand the characters and the world they live in, and then to make sense of that—to make it believable to me as I write it. In a book like ***Batman,*** that necessitates making it gritty and dark and real. You want to *feel* how high those building reach into that grimy night sky. It's part of what makes the character cool."

...LOOKS LIKE YOU WERE-- heh--YOU WERE ALL WORRIED ABOUT NOTHING--heh heh... heh...
Wait. That quiver in Claridge's voice wasn't just nervous laughter.
Damn it.
HA HA HA HA HA HA
HA HA-- GORDON--HA HA-HELP--HA HA HA-HELP-- HA HA
SKRASH
HAHA HAHAHA HAHA

What was it about this story that made it so appealing to Brubaker? The writer obviously has a very busy schedule already, what with his regular work on such series as ***Gotham Central, The Authority: Revolution, Sleeper: Season Two,*** and ***Captain America,*** so obviously something more than a need to fill a hole in his writing schedule motivated him to tackle this project "The most appealing thing really was doing a story that attempted to build a bridge between ***Batman: Year One*** and ***The Killing Joke***. Which meant getting to write something from a specific place in Batman's past, a time free of a lot of extra characters and continuity. That was very freeing, to just be able to say, this takes place then, and run with it. It's set in the Year One era rather than a particular time period like the 1930's or the 1970's or anything like that.

"Parts of the story are a specific nod to the very first Joker story that *Bill Finger* and *Bob Kane* did in 1940, so there was that. And there's the tale of the Joker and the Red Hood, which is from all the various Batman continuities. Other than that, though, this was designed to fit in with ***Year One*** and ***The Killing Joke,*** really—not that I'm suggesting it'll be as good as either of them, but that's what I was reaching for!—so I tried to make sure it felt like it took place right after ***Year One*** ended, and that its events matched up with those two comics as much as I could, while still keeping it a strong story that deserves to exist on its own. At least, I hope it does!..."

Does Brubaker add any new twists to the Joker mythos in this story, or is he merely trying to add a depth of personaltiy to previously chronicled events? "There are some new twists to the story, sure, and there's a new spin on his relationship to Batman," Brubaker said, "and to Batman's attempts to understand this madman. This isn't a rehash of a previously told story, though. It just has a few elements lifted from the first Joker story—the whole 'killing people at the stroke of midnight' thing—but other than that, it's completely a new tale."

Does Brubaker see the presence of Batman serving as a catalyst for the rise of these bizarre villains, or would they have come to be in Gotham regardless, making Batman's existence a serendipitous salvation for Gotham? "Actually, that's one of the themes that the story explores," Brubaker said, "so I don't really want to get into it. Suffice it to say, the story answers the question for me."

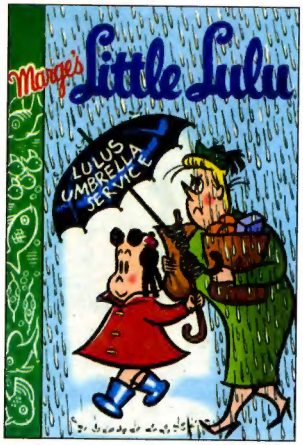
Find those answers for yourself in ***Batman: The Man Who Laughed,*** a $6.95 prestige-format one-shot slated for release at about the same time as this issue of *CSN*.

BY CLIFF BIGGERS

Courtesy your friendly neighborhood comics outlet!

Comic Shop Newsarama

Produced by *Comic Shop News* in cooperation with *Matt Brady* and *newsarama.com*



A Lulu of a Publishing Plan

Ever since Dark Horse released their first ***Little Lulu*** volume a couple of months back, ***CSN*** has fielded questions from readers who wanted to know just where this book fit into the comprehensive Little Lulu publishing plan. Obviously, these weren't the first ***Lulu*** stories published by Dell... so when did they see print, and when will those first tales be collected?

"Dark Horse is proudly publishing the entire ***Little Lulu*** comics library, and the volumes eventually will be numbered in chronological order, though it will take us about a year to get the first books in order," series editor *Shawna Gore* said. "It's a little confusing, we know, but here's why we did it this way, and how you can make sense of it: Dark Horse's president, *Mike Richardson*, is a *huge* ***Little Lulu*** fan, and he's very knowledgeable—not to mention opinionated!—about the work. When it was first determined that we would be publishing the Lulu library in its entirety, Mike wanted the books to have the absolute best chance of catching on with all-new readers from the very start. That meant that we needed to start by publishing some of the series' *best* material right off the bat. To make a long story short, we therefore started our publishing program by releasing a collection of the comics from the time period that Mike felt best represented *John Stanley & Irving Tripp* 'hitting their stride' with the work.

The first two volumes of our new ***Little Lulu*** books collect issues #6 through 16 of Lulu's self-titled comics series. Essentially these are from Mike's favorite era of the series, and they represented what he thought was the best material for getting new readers hooked on ***Lulu***. After our first two releases, we're going back to the very start of Lulu's appearances in Dell's ***Four Color*** series, and from that point on, each release will be in chronological order.

"As the series editor and a new reader of the ***Lulu*** material myself, I appreciate Mike's knowledge and availability as a resource. At the same time, I don't make any real value judgments between one era of ***Lulu*** and another. Having now read every single story in the comic's library we're publishing, I think it's all utterly hysterical and extremely charming. I was sucked in after the very first story, and remain smitten with the work every time I move on to a new chapter. I'll leave these debates to our Lulu fanatics and experts."

And for readers who want to know exactly what order the volumes will appear in, here's that info from Dark Horse's *Ryan Hill*:

- ***Little Lulu: Lulu Goes Shopping*** (Vol. 3) (1st release)
- ***Little Lulu: Lulu Takes a Trip*** (Vol. 4) (2nd release)
- ***Little Lulu: My Dinner with Lulu*** (Vol. 5) (3rd release)
- ***Little Lulu: Sunday Afternoon*** (Vol. 1) (4th release)
- ***Little Lulu: Lulu in the Doghouse*** (Vol. 2) (5th release)

- "The volumes will not be numbered until their second printings," Dark Horse's *Michael J. Martens* explained. "At that time they will be numbered according to original (not Dark Horse) release dates."

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Coming Comics
Marvel in April

Arana has graduated to her own series, but that doesn't mean that Amazing Fantasy has ended. *Fred Van Lente & Leonard Kirk* introduce a new 21st-Century version of a classic Marvel character as they revamp the Scorpion beginning in ***Amazing Fantasy #7***. After the vicious murder of her adoptive parents, Carmilla Black discovers her biological mother is the top scientist of the world-wide terrorist network, A.I.M. Now, to unravel the secrets of her true identity and mysterious power, she's hot on the heels of her enigmatic mother, with S.H.I.E.L.D. hot on her trail, hoping she'll lead them right to the terrorists' leadership!

Now that Spidey's a member of the New Avengers, how will that influence the events that unfold in ***Amazing Spider-Man?*** *J. Michael Straczynski & Mike Deodato* begin to answer that question in ***Amazing Spider-Man #519***, the first part of the six-issue "New Avengers" story arc. And just wait 'til you see what fate has in store for Peter... and for Mary Jane and Aunt May!

Captain America & The Falcon comes to an end with the fourteenth issue as a a distraught Falcon sets out to correct his mistakes—starting with recapturing Captain America's Navy counterpart, the so-called "Anti-Cap."

It all starts here! The story where all your questions will be answered! Why is the Timebroker so evil all of a sudden?! Who are the Timebreakers?! Who's been pulling the strings all along?! And when the heck is Beak going to make himself useful?! *Tony Bedard & Mizuki Sakakibara* answer these questions beginning in ***Exiles #62***.

Karl Kesel & Tom Grummett bring back the devilish Diablo in ***Fantastic Four #525*** & 526, a two-parter. And now the potion-toting terrorist has declared alchemical warfare on the FF! Making matter worse, the World's Greatest Imaginauts are becoming more and more tired, irritable, delirious... sick! Coincidence... or part of Diablo's nightmarish plan?

We've got the Avengers, the Young Avengers... and now we have the Great Lakes Avengers! in ***G.L.A.***, a four-issue limited series by *Dan Slott & Paul Pelletier*, you'll meet the guys who got the shortest end of the super-hero stick. But with the *real* Avengers disassembled, they're going to try to step up to the plate and deal with one of their most powerful villains! Can they save the day? Well, we just hope these guys can save *themselves*!

The hero of song and story is back in action in his own limited series courtesy of *Frank Tieri & Mark Texeira*. ***Hercules*** features a Greek god who's not sure how much longer he's destined for this world... but he's not going to fade away quietly! Reeling from the tragic death of Thor, the Prince of Power knows his star is fading fast. So what better way to pump up his Q-rating than to relive his defining moment? When his most bitter foe throws down the gauntlet, Hercules agrees to the challenge: Twelve labors, each more perilous than the one before it—and each updated for reality-TV consumption.

It was just over thirty years ago that the Hulk fought a sawed-off, scrappy Canadian named Wolverine. And on the island where nothing is as it seems, he's returned—exactly as he was back then—to try and carve himself a piece of the Hulk. So what's going on here? *Peter David & Lee Weeks* have some surprises in store in ***Incredible Hulk #80***.

Year two of ***Marvel Knights Spider-Man*** sees the debut of a *new writer/artist team as* Reginald Hudlin—the man who's revamping ***Black Panther***—is joined by *Billy Tan* of ***X-23*** fame for a new story arc, "Wild Blue Yonder." So what's going on here? Peter's got an incredible new pad (you won't believe where), a new job, and -- although he doesn't know it -- a new nemesis who's everything that Peter isn't. But first, Spider-Man's got to deal with a more pressing problem – a shape-shifting super-villain who's developed a nasty habit…and will do anything to feed it.

Spider-Man and Moon Knight unite to confront the Ringmaster in ***Marvel Team-Up* #7** by *Robert Kirkman & Scott Kolins*. The circus sneak is sick of sitting on the sidelines. He's out to make a name for himself. Unfortunately, Spider-Man and Moon Knight are caught up in the middle of his master plan.

Learn all about Spidey and thirty of his closest friends and dangerous adversaries in ***Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe: Spider-Man 2005***, a sequel to last year's Spidey volume that updates all the ever-changing data on Marvel's favorite webslinger.

Marvel's super-team family is back in action as *Marc Sumerak & Gurihiru* kick off a new ***Power Pack*** limited series. Alex, Julie, Jack and Katie are back in brand-new stories that are sure to delight new readers and longtime fans alike! In the first issue, issue: Katie Power is ready to reveal her secret super-hero life to the world...and it's up to her siblings to stop her before the truth can come back to haunt them.

Ubergangster Nicky Cavella is back with a vengeance in *Garth Ennis & Leo Fernandez'* ***Punisher* #19**—and this time he's hitting Frank Castle where he least expects it... right in the black pit of his hardened heart. With one unspeakable act, Nicky will go right to the top of Frank's "to-do" list – and there's nowhere he'd rather be.

Paul Jenkins ends his five-year run as a Spidey-scribe with ***Spectacular Spider-Man* #27**, a self-contained tale that reunites him with artist *Mark Buckingham*. So who's following Jenkins on the series? *Nobody*—'cuz this is the last issue of the series!

Spidey's got breakout problems—and no amount of Clearasil is going to help! When the ***New Avengers'*** jailbreak of the century unleashes a flood of deadly villains on the street of New York City, Spidey finds himself caught betwen two warring gangs of bad guys in ***Spider-Man: Breakout,*** a five-part limited series by *Tony Bedard & Manuel Garcia*.

After years of developing friendship, what could cause a rift between Spidey and the Torch? A girl! But not just any girl, mind you.—this is the seductive bad girl The Black Cat we're talking about! See what happens in ***Spider-Man/Human Torch #4*** by *Dan Slott & Ty Templeton*.

The next generation of alien symbiotes comes into its own in ***Toxin,*** a six-issue limited series by *Peter Milligan & Darick Robertson*. When a full-scale jailbreak leaves New York overrun with super villains, Pat sees the perfect opportunity to use the creature sharing his body for good. But Toxin might have other ideas! Featuring a special guest appearance by Spider-Man and a different villain encounter every issue!

The Ultimates take on their renegade member, Thor, in *Mark Millar & Bryan Hitch's* ***Ultimates 2* #5**. But can even the greatest super team on Earth take down a Norse thunder god?

Brian K. Vaughan & Stuart Immonen introduce an all-new villain to the Marvel Universe in ***Ultimate X-Men* #58**. When a dangerous young mutant immune to psychic control takes Charles Xavier and the rest of a Manhattan bank hostage, the Professor must lead a diverse group of humans in a risky bid to end the siege.

What's scarier than a high-profile super hero turned deathcult assassin? *Two* super heroes turned deathcult assassins, that's what! Hydra might have lost Wolverine, but two more take his place, and one is a former X-Man who will shock former teammates and readers alike! As the new Supreme Hydra launches an unprecedented attack on S.H.I.E.L.D., there's precious little time for second guesses, leaving Nick Fury to send Wolverine into the heat of battle, hoping the deprogramming will stick. See how it works out in *Mark Millar & John Romita Jr.'s* ***Wolverine* #27**.

Marvel collected editions for April include:

- ***Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes***, a hardcover compilation of the limited series by *Joe Casey & Scott Kolins*;
- ***Alpha Flight Volume Two: Waxing Poetic***, collecting ***Alpha Flight* #s 7-12**;
- ***Black Widow: Homecoming***, reprinting the miniseries by *Richard K. Morgan, Goran Parlov, & Bill Sienkiewicz*;
- ***Bullseye: Greatest Hits***, collecting the *Daniel Way-Steve Dillon* miniseries;
- ***Cable/Deadpool Volume Two: The Burnt Offering***, reprinting ***Cable/Deadpool* #s 7-12**;
- ***Daredevil Volume Eleven: Golden Age***, collecting ***Daredevil* #s 66-69**;
- ***Essential Hulk Volume Three***, a black-and-white phone-book sized collection of Incredible ***Hulk* #s 118-142**, ***Captain Marvel* #s 20-21**, and ***Avengers* #88**;
- ***Fantastic Four/Spider-Man Classic***, reprinting various meetings of the web-slinger and the FF;
- ***Marvel Masterworks: The Amazing Spider-Man Volume Seven***, collecting ***Amazing Spider-Man* #s 62-67**, ***Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #5** and ***Spectacular Spider-Man Magazine* #s 1 & 2**;
- ***Marvel Milestones: Venom***, a one-shot collecting the first appearance of Venom from ***Secret Wars* #8** and the first appearance of Hercules from ***Journey Into Mystery Annual* #1**;
- ***Marvel Visionaries: Steve Ditko***, a celebration of the storied career of Spider-Man and Doctor Strange's co-creator, complete with stories ranging from his pre-hero Marvel days to his 1980's Marvel work;
- ***Mystique Volume Four: Quiet***, reprinting ***Mystique* #s 19-24**;
- ***Powers Volume Eight: Legends***, reprinting the first Marvel/Icon ***Powers*** story arc and adding the rarely seen prologue from ***Wizard's Edge***;
- ***She-Hulk Volume Two: Superhuman Law***, collecting ***She-Hulk* #s 7-12**;
- ***Spider-Man/Doctor Octopus: Year One***, collecting the *Zeb Wells-Kaare Andrews* limited series;
- ***Spider-Man: India***, collecting the culturally divergent miniseries about Pavitr Prabhakar;
- ***Supreme Power Volume One HC***, collecting the first thirteen issues of *J. Michael Straczynski & Gary Frank's* Supreme Powers, along with character designs, alternate cover treatments, the historic first appearance of the original Squadron Supreme in ***Avengers* #85-86**, and more;
- ***Thor: Son of Asgard Volume Two—Worthy***, a digest-sized compilation of ***Thor: Son of Asgard* #s 7-12**; and
- ***Wolverine: Enemy of the State Volume One***, collecting the *Mark Millar-John Romita Jr.* story arc from ***Wolverine* #s 20-25**.

Stan Lee's Thinking Big

By the time most men turn eighty, their productive working years have come to an end. But *Stan Lee* has *never* been like most men...

Lee, the man who's been presenting Marvel Comics since he co-launched the Marvel Age with fellow Bullpen members *Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Don Heck, Dick Ayers*, and others in the early sixties, now does most of his work out of the public spotlight. This month, however, he's inviting comic book readers to pay a visit to his newest world... a world of comic book publishers and super-powered giants.

"***Alexa*** is my latest and most subtle superheroine," Lee told ***CSN***. "The series deals with a comic book company trying to get the story rights to the lives of two twenty-foot-tall superhero giants who suddenly appear from a rift between dimensions. Alexa works for the comic book company and begins to wonder: are they *really* superheroes, or something far deadlier? Also, what is the mystic bond between her and the mysterious giants from another realm? It goes from there."

In many ways, Alexa has a traditional comics feel and tone, particularly insofar as plot, characters, and ethical values are concerned.. How does Lee feel about comics' drifting away from the more positive values that were a part of comics for so long? Does he see any problems with the move towards the "real-world" stories? "Actually, I don't much pay attention to shifting trends," said Lee, a man more accustomed to setting trends than following them. "I do what I've always done: I write stories that interest me! I figure there are enough readers who have the same tastes as I do. Since I don't live under a stone and am fully aware of the world and the societal mores around me, I'd like to think that whatever I write reflects the times in which we live. As for blurring the line between heroes and villains, I've done that in the past. Whether to do it or not just depends on the story, the characters, and the mood I might be trying to set."

While *Stan Lee's* name is most prominently featured on the graphic novel, he's the first to point out that it's not a solo effort. "I came up with the concept and plot, and *Dave Gibbons* worked on the character designs, some of which appear as gorgeous full pages in the book. Then *Steve Roman* wrote the script based on my plot, and away we went! The finished graphic novel features art by Gibbons, *Dan Jurgens, Chris Malgrain*, and others.

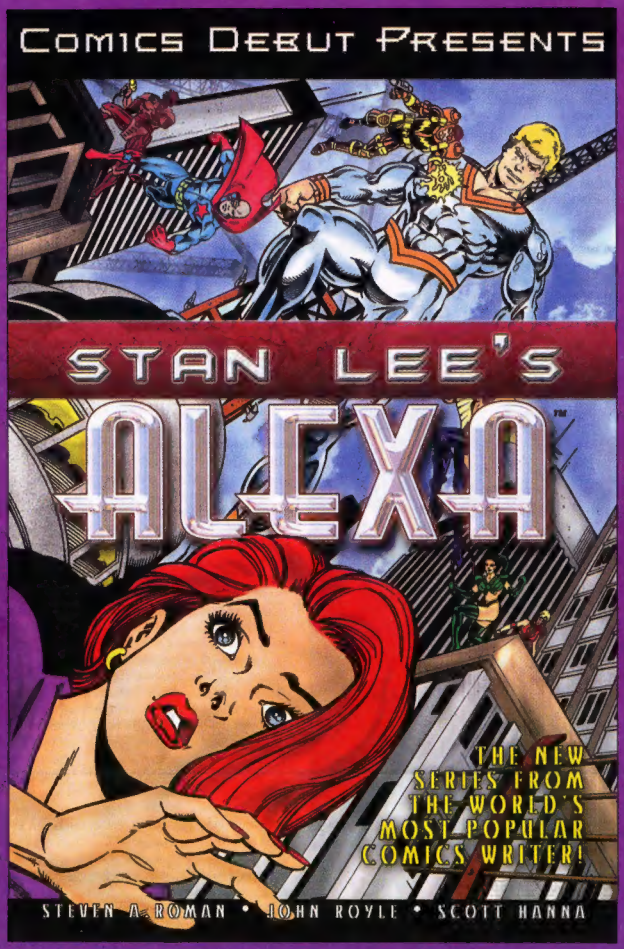
Why enlist the aid of several artists rather than using a single illustrator? "A matter of time," Lee explained. "Also, we thought readers would enjoy seeing different art styles used on one story, which lets us use *Dave Gibbons'* art in the backstory for the comic book company's titles."

During his days at Marvel, Lee was accustomed to bouncing ideas off his fellow comic book creators; apparently, old habits die hard! "The basic idea behind ***Alexa*** was mine," Lee said. "Naturally, others made suggestions as we went along. I cooked up a lot of new characters for the universe."

What motivated Lee, who hasn't done much for comics since his work on DC's Just Imagine... line, to return to the keyboard? "My friend *Byron Preiss* can be very persuasive," Lee joked. "Besides, it's a story I've always liked and this gave me a chance to see it come to life as a graphic novel."

Is ***Alexa*** a standalone graphic novel, or is this the first of a series? "She's definitely planned to be a long-lasting series for ibooks, who are distributed by Simon and Schuster and Diamond in the U.S. and U.K." And this is one of several project that Lee has in the works. "To tell the truth, I've *always* got projects in the works. I'd feel naked without them! Since my new company, POW! Entertainment, is involved in movies, TV, animation, DVDs and video games—and most of the concepts were created and written by me—I'd say I'm probably busier than when I was just doing comics!"

Alexa is scheduled for late February release from ibooks—but readers who don't want to wait that long to get a look at the graphic novel can check out the first few pages of the book in this issue's ***CSN Debut***.

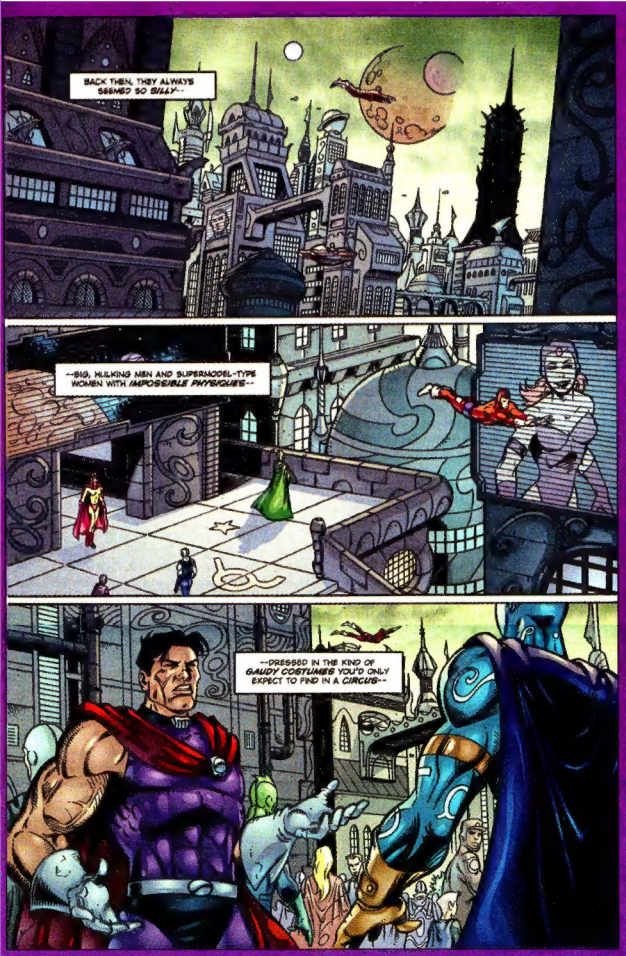

COMICS DEBUT PRESENTS
STAN LEE'S
ALEXA™
THE NEW SERIES FROM THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR COMICS WRITER!
STEVEN A. ROMAN • JOHN ROYLE • SCOTT HANNA

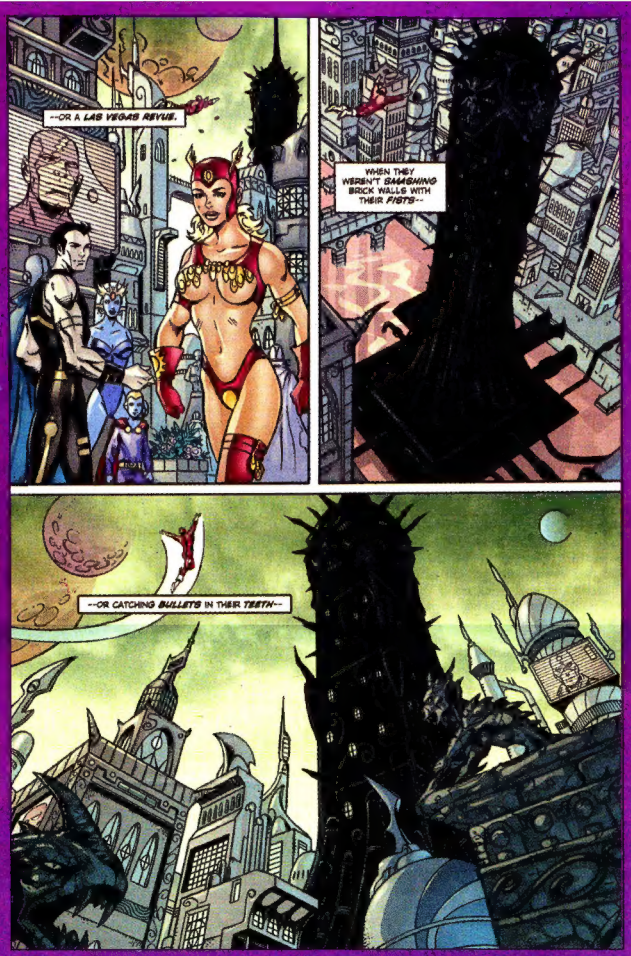
WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, I NEVER CARED FOR SUPERHEROES.
OF COURSE, THAT WAS BEFORE I STARTED DRAWING THEM FOR A LIVING --BUT THAT'S ANOTHER STORY...

--THEY WERE CHASING AFTER EQUALLY HORRIBLY-DRESSED BAD GUYS--
--OR MOVING PLANETS OUT OF THEIR ORBITS.
TYPICAL BOXWOOD FANTASY STUFF.

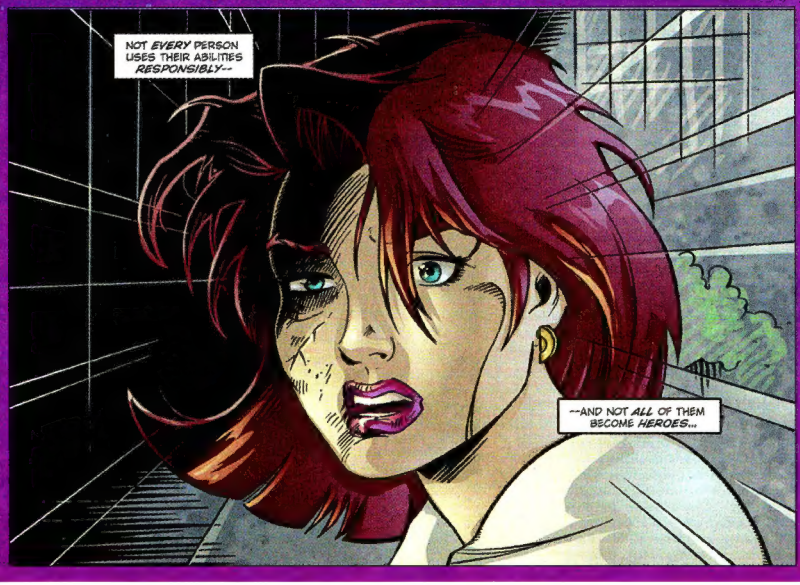
BUT WHO COULD EVER KNOW--
--HOW COULD I HAVE EVER SUSPECTED--
--IT WOULD ALL TURN OUT TO BE REAL...?

I COULDN'T HAVE, OF COURSE. NOBODY COULD HAVE.
I MEAN, HONEST-TO-GOODNESS SUPERHEROES? FIGHTING CRIME ON THE STREETS OF NEW YORK, LIKE THE GLAMAZON OR MISTER PAIN?
JUST THE IDEA OF IT SOUNDS RIDICULOUS.
AND I SHOULD KNOW-- BEING A COMIC BOOK ARTIST, AFTER ALL.


BACK THEN, THEY ALWAYS SEEMED SO *SILLY*--
--BIG, HULKING MEN AND SUPERMODEL-TYPE WOMEN WITH *IMPOSSIBLE PHYSIQUES*--
--DRESSED IN THE KIND OF *GAUDY COSTUMES* YOU'D ONLY EXPECT TO FIND IN A *CIRCUS*--


--OR A *LAS VEGAS REVUE*.
WHEN THEY WEREN'T *SMASHING* BRICK WALLS WITH THEIR *FISTS*--
--OR CATCHING *BULLETS* IN THEIR *TEETH*--

BUT IT WAS-- IT *IS*--REAL. EVERY BIT OF IT--
--BOTH THE GOOD --AND THE BAD.
UNFORTUNATELY, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE AT THE TIME, I WAS SO *CAUGHT UP* IN THE EXCITEMENT OF MEETING ACTUAL COSTUMED BEINGS FROM ANOTHER WORLD--
--THAT I *FORGOT* THE *CARDINAL RULE* OF SUPERHERO COMIC BOOKS:


NOT *EVERY* PERSON USES THEIR ABILITIES *RESPONSIBLY*--
--AND NOT *ALL* OF THEM BECOME *HEROES*...

Comic Shop Newsarama

Moore Fun For Firestorm

Last week, *CSN* told you about writer *Dan Jolley's* upcoming departure from ***Firestorm***—and now we can tell you who will be taking his place. Former Vertigo editor *Stuart Moore* signs on as the series' writer beginning with ***Firestorm #14.***

"I'd written a few ***Justice League Adventures*** stories for editor *Steve Wacker*, and we'd been discussing doing something else for a while," Moore told ***Comic Shop Newsarama***'s *Matt Brady*. "When Firestorm came free, he asked me if I'd like to pitch for it, and DC liked what they saw. It all happened dizzyingly fast."

As Moore sees it, "Firestorm's kind of like a modernized, more powerful Spider-Man; his alter ego, Jason Rusch, is a young guy just learning how to get by in the world. There's a lot you can do with a character like that."

Given the nuclear basis of Firestorm's powers (he can literally change matter at the nuclear level), Moore said he's finding the research he did for his last major comics project, ***PARA*** (set in an abandoned supercollider, and published by Penny Farthing Press) particularly handy, as well as the fact that (if for nothing else, thematic inspiration), Moore's father was a nuclear scientist.

"One thing I want to do with Firestorm is ground the stories a little more in real physics," Moore said. "The original book had a lot of science-based villains, and we're going to get back to that. You'll see some new enemies right away, starting with a man who's literally made of Dark Matter—the mysterious stuff that exists out in space, between the stars.

"Of course, any *real* physicists will probably laugh their asses off at the science. But that's part of the fun of comics!"

Since ***Firestorm*** is Moore's first mainstream superhero title, he's eager to show what he can do. "The first two lines of my pitch to Steve were, 'There's no point thinking small with Firestorm. He controls the basic building blocks of matter and energy; he's potentially the most powerful being in the DC Universe.' I think too many people come onto monthly comics thinking too conservatively; I'd like to really blow things up—both in Firestorm's world and in Jason's.

"So the first story arc is about Jason's determination to get his life in order. He's moving out on his own, he's got a new job, he's determined to make enough money to go to college in the fall. Naturally, none of these things work out exactly the way he planned.

"Meanwhile, Jason's learning just what Firestorm is capable of. And there are forces all over the DC Universe focused on Firestorm...precisely because he *is* so powerful. By our third or fourth issue, everything collides violently, like atoms in a particle accelerator."

Moore also has plans to take Firestorm's powers to a higher level.. "Basically he can channel energy through himself and transform matter into energy, or into other types of matter," Moore said. "Ultimately, Firestorm can do *anything*. But Jason Rusch is still learning what that means.

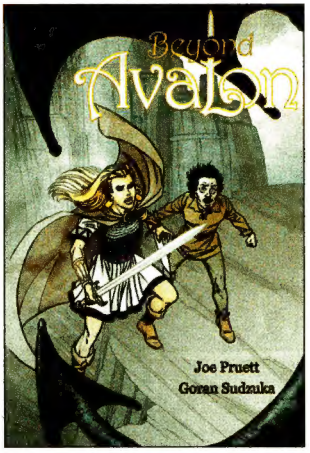
"Jason's a fascinating character; his relationship with his dad is particularly tense and interesting. I'm also very conscious of the fact that ***Firestorm*** is the only DC/Marvel superhero book on the market with an African-American protagonist. This month, at least.

"All in all, I've got a good feeling about the book. The ideas all fell together quickly, the events in Jason's and Firestorm's lives all play off each other nicely, and the stakes keep rising as the story goes on. And DC's been very supportive of what I want to do."

Firestorm #14 is slated for early June release.

A Novel Approach to Vampires

Oops—it seems like were slightly misinformed regarding Dark Horse's upcoming ***Vampire Hunter D*** series. Rather than graphic novels, these are actually prose novels by *Hideyuki Kikuchi*, with interior illustrations by *Yoshitaka Amano*. The novels, set in the distant future, focus on a struggling human race finally crawling out from under the domination of a race of vampires, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Hunters—warriors who have pledged their weapons and their lives to the eradication of these vampires. Look for the first novel in April.



Coming Comics Image in April

The Art of Greg Horn, which sold out of its hardcover run in just a couple of weeks, comes back into print this spring in trade paperback. This edition collects many of Greg's most renowned pieces. Included here are commercial art projects for industry giants such as Nike, Bacardi, Sony, Ringling Bros., Universal Studios and Allstate Insurance, plus nearly fifty magazine covers painted for Wizard and various gaming magazines.

Megan's quest for her missing father, King Arthur, continues in *Joe Pruett & Goran Sudzuka's* ***Beyond Avalon #2.*** Having left the safety of Avalon, Megan finds herself in a land unlike anything she ever imagined. Now, accompanied by her new dwarf companion, Jerome, she will traverse cities that float upon the air, meet magical creatures and face fire-breathing dragons!

The inspiration for anew animation pilot from Paranoid Delusions Productions comes to comics in *Arthur Suydam's* ***Cholly & Flytrap: The Original Adventures #1.*** These original tales of Suydam's ultimate anti-heroes, Cholly and Flytrap, open as the team becomes embroiled in a vicious battle on a stark alien landscape. Don't miss these terrifying, funny tales of action and adventure from a master craftsman with a startlingly unique point of view.

Now here's a surprising addition to the Darkness' talent line-up: *Terry Moore*, creator of ***Strangers in Paradise***, has signed on as writer of ***Darkness/Vampirella***, a crossover one-shot illustrated by *Eric Basaldua & Jay Leisten*, with a regular cover by Basaldua and a one-in-ten must-see variant by Moore! Jackie and Vampi both stalk the streets of New York, but when their goals run at cross purposes, two tough customers are set at each other's throats!

Death, be not old! ***Death Jr. #1*** kicks off a three-parter by *Gary Whitta & Ted Naifeh* that stars the son of... well, do we really have to tell you? It seems that being the offspring of the Grim Reaper has its own challenges. Luckily, "DJ" finds his niche with some of the weird kids: Pandora, a little goth girl, Smith & Weston, conjoined twins, Stigmartha, a girl who bleeds when she gets nervous, and The Seep, an armless, legless, foreign exchange student in a jar.

Top Cow continues its ***Fine Art Lithograph*** series with ***Keu Cha's Pirate Darkness*** and ***Michael Turner's Witchblade #4,*** each produced in a limited edition of 250 pieces. Grab either or both of these while you can, because there probably won't be any second chances!

Invincible has been widely praised as "the best superhero book you're not reading," so now *Robert Kirkman, Ryan Ottley, Bill Crabtree,* and Image are removing any reason you have for not trying this wonderful series. ***Invincible #0*** is a bargain-priced 50¢ issue that features the origin of Mark Grayson, a look at his powers, and all the background any reader would need to get up to speed.

Chuck Dixon & Sergio Cariello, two comics veterans who helped make CrossGen's books so interesting, are joining forces for a WWII mystery, ***Iron Ghost.*** With the Third Reich on the brink of collapse, someone is killing German officers and foot soldiers guilty of crimes that would go unpunished. Inspectors Tannhauser and Volz are assigned to find and capture the mysterious vigilante known as the Iron Ghost. With no clues besides a tattered piece of paper with a single word, Tannhauser and Volz are forced to look at every possible suspect—including one of their own.

Magdalena confronts Dracula in the first issue of a limited series that pits top Cow's heroes against an array of classic monsters. ***Magdalena Vs. Dracula: Monster War #1*** by *Chris Golden, Tom Sniegoski, & Joyce Chin* begins when Dracula invades London, and only the Magdalena can stop him! But can Drac turn Maggy into a vampire...or will the Tomb Raider be able to stop him? the story continues next month, when Tomb Raider takes on the Wolf-Men!

Mark Waid's original script for ***Hunter-Killer #1*** is featured in the appropriately-entitled ***Mark Waid's Hunter-Killer #1 Scriptbook,*** a forty-pager that shows you how the book progressed from script to finished project. See the words as they landed on the page and how it lined up with *Marc Silvestri's* art, with Waid's own notes on what did and didn't make the story.

Mike Baron & Mike Norton invite you to join them in ***The Night Club,*** a four-parter that'll bring some chills to a summer holiday. As Boston prepares for the 4th of July, crime is out of control. An eerie army of inhuman creatures threatens anyone who ventures away from well-lit streets. Two teen runaways escape to the only shelter they can find from the rain and danger of the streets: an old bar under the freeway. The preacher Walter knows this is no coincidence. Those who join together in its walls are the Night Club. Armed with the word of God, he draws the others to him to prepare for the apocalypse.

Fiona Avery, Staz Johnson, & Wayne Faucher pick up where *J. Michael Straczynski* left off in ***Rising Stars: Voices of the Dead,*** a six-issue limited series. The tale focuses on Lionel Zerb, who can see dead people. Always considered the freak in the Rising Stars universe, Zerb's story has largely gone overlooked…until now. As a direct conduit to the dead, Zerb opens an agency as a Ghost Interpreter, helping people deal with hauntings and other "spirit" cases. But one day, Zerb stumbles upon a force greater than he ever imagined. Lionel must confront an ancient spiritual power that brings him near death, but closer to an understanding about the mysteries of the universe.

Frank Cho, the brilliant mastermind of ***Liberty Meadows*** and the creator of Marvel's ***Shanna the She-Devil,*** transcends death in ***Zombie King #0.*** The story begins with a new breakthrough drug that can mend bones, reconnect nerves, and even reanimate dead cells. Only one pharmaceutical company has it... and only they know the drug's dark secrets and the price of immortality. How far will they go to keep it all? How far will others go to *take* it?

Image collected editions for April include:

- ***The Gray Area Volume One: All of This Can Be Yours***, collecting the metaphysical suspense melodrama by *Glen Brunswick, John Romita Jr., & Klaus Janson*;
- ***Rising Stars HC***, collecting the entire twenty-four issue series by *J. Michael Straczynski, Keu Cha, Brent Anderson, John Starr, & Brian Buccellato* in one massive 624-page hardcover—and there's also a deluxe slipcased edition for those of you who want only the best;
- ***Ultra: Seven Days***, compiling the superhuman-interest tale by *Joshua & Jonathan Luna* that focuses on superheroine Pearl Penalosa, aka Ultra, and her run-in with romance;
- ***The Walking Dead Volume Three: Safety Behind Bars***, collecting *Robert Kirkman & Charlie Adlard's* ***Walking Dead #s 13-18***; and
- ***Witchblade Volume Four, collecting Witchblade #s 26-39***, featuring the torrid triangle between Witchblade-wielder Sara Pezzini, assassin Ian Nottingham, and supernatural mobster Jackie Estacado—including the riveting second Witchblade/Darkness crossover.

Ins & Outs

In: A second printing of Marvel's ***X-23 #1,*** which is on schedule for late February release. The second printing will feature a variant cover by *Billy Tan*.

Out: ***Manhunter #5,*** an Identity Crisis tie-in, which has totally sold out of its initial printing and a hefty overprinting.

In: *Olivier Coipel*, who has signed an exclusive contract with Marvel. "It shows me that Marvel put their trust in me," Coipel said about the agreement. "That helps to be more confident. I feel more and more comfortable with the Marvel Universe and I really wanted to get the opportunity to work on other characters, to explore a bit deeper this universe." Coipel is currently working on Marvel's ***House of M*** project, slated to debut this summer.

Out! ***Darkstalkers #2***, the Devil's Due comic inspired by the hit CapCom game, has entirely sold out of its first printing. To fill the demand for this issue, Devil's Due is going back to press for a second printing, which will feature a brand-new cover.

In! *Mark Bagley*, the fan-fave ***Ultimate Spider-Man*** artist, has signed a two-year extension of his Marvel Comics exclusive. "I've had an incredibly stable and fulfilling career with Marvel, and I'm as happy with the company now as I've ever been," Bagley said. "And I think the contract means they are just as happy with me." Bagley, the most prolific Spidey illustrator in the character's history, will continue to work with *Brian Bendis* on ***Ultimate Spider-Man***.

In! *Tom Grummett*, who has signed an exclusive with Marvel Comics. "I'm really looking forward to the opportunity to work with these great Marvel characters," Grummett said. I'm particularly excited with my current gig on ***New Thunderbolts***, and proud to be working with such a great team."

The Dawn of a New Series

Good things come to those who wait! And this is especially true for those who are fans of ***Dawn*** creator *Joseph Michael Linsner*.

This spring, Dynamic Forces is releasing its long-awaited second series of ***Dawn Trading Cards***. This set, ***The Dawn Fifteenth Anniversary Trading Card Series***, was originally scheduled for 2004, but Dynamic Forces and Linsner decided to push it into 2005 to pack this second series with even more Dawn goodness—including hand drawn sketch cards by *Joseph Michael Linsner* himself! This series will not only feature some of Linsner's best images over the years, but will also showcase at least nine brand-new images fully painted by Linsner, created exclusively for this series. Look for it in late March.

Free for All

Free Comic Book Day 2005 is still three months away, but publishers are already looking ahead, making plans regarding what books they'd like to offer to the many readers and newcomers who will visit comic shops around the world on this day to discover or rediscover the excitement of sequential art.

The available comics will vary by store, but all are special editions published specifically for the event. They range from all-ages-friendly titles to fare intended for sophisticated readers. "The selection of titles is a testament to the diversity in the industry," Free Comic Book Day spokesman *Barry Lyga* said. "More than anything else, Free Comic Book Day exists to show that there is a comic book for every age, reading level, and taste. This year's variety of available free titles once again makes that point."

Gold Sponsor Books, which will be available in every participating comic shop, include:

- ***Betty & Veronica*** (Archie)
- ***Ronin Hood of the 47 Samurai #1*** (Beckett)
- ***Bongo Comics Free Comic Book Day Gimme! Gimme! Giveaway*** (Bongo)
- ***Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*** (Dark Horse)
- ***The Batman Strikes! #1*** (DC)
- ***Devil's Due Special Edition*** (Devil's Due)
- ***Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge*** (Gemstone)
- ***Flight Primer*** (Image)
- ***Impact University*** (Impact)
- ***Marvel Adventures: Spider-Man & the Fantastic Four*** (Marvel)

Many stores will also offer new or reprint books prepared for Free Comic Book Day by such Silver Sponsor publishers as AdHouse Books, Alternative Comics, Arcana Studios, Caption Box, Comics Festival, Drawn & Quarterly, Dreamwave, Fantagraphics, G.T. Labs, Heroic Publishing, Jetpack Press, Keenspot, Oni Press, Renaissance Press, Serve Man Press, Sky Dog Press, Top Shelf, and Wizard.

In addition, Bronze Sponsors such as A Fine Line and TokyoPop will donate free quantities of previously published titles for distribution on this day.

Look for ore info on Free Comic Book Day 2005 in upcoming issues of *CSN*—and start making your plans now!

Dark Horse at the Nexus

It's the news that many comic fans have been waiting for: one of the greatest comic book series of the 1980's is finally slated to appear in collected editions. Dark Horse has plans in the works to bring *Mike Baron & Steve Rude's* ***Nexus*** back into print later this year.

The series, cited by some as one of the seminal comic book achievements of the '80s first saw life in 1982 as a black and white series published by Capital Comics before moving to full color with a relaunch in 1983. First Comics took over publishing the series beginning with issue #7, with the series lasting through to #80 in 1991. The property then moved to Dark Horse, and a number of miniseries were published throughout the '90s, following the continuity of the original series. The property has languished somewhat in the last few years, with relaunches, restarts, and an animated series mentioned as future possibilities.

Nexus focuses on Horatio Hellpop, a man selected by an alien being known as Merk to serve as his assassin, with one caveat—as Nexus, Horatio would be compelled by Merk (who spoke to him through nightmares) to kill only mass murderers... beginning with his own father.

"***Nexus*** is coming back in the form of a rather large TPB from Dark Horse, in November," Rude wrote in an e-mail. "This time, they will be starting from the very beginning (about time), by reprinting the very first ***Nexus*** book; the oversized, b&w ***Nexus*** magazine from Capital Comics. My cover painting for this first book has long been completed, and I think you'll get a charge out of what I've done. When I conceived the idea, it was so fitting, I almost laughed out loud..."

The Games People Play

by Brett Brooks

The Return of the Ring RPG

What you thought was gone is back once more. And you thought that everything was going to end at Mount Doom...

Decipher has announced a new series of supplements for the ***Lord of the Rings Role-Playing Game***. "Changes in our internal workings, as well as changes in the current RPG market, caused us to delay and re-evaluate several products that had been scheduled for a 2003 and 2004 release," said *Warren Holland*, Chairman and CEO of Decipher. "Our roleplaying customers let us know they wished the line to continue, and we're happy to announce today that it will. We understand their frustration and appreciate their patience while we sorted out the necessary details."

So, what can you expect to see? Well, in April you can look for ***Paths of the Wise: The Guide to Magicians and Loremasters***, which expands the realm of magic of Middle-Earth, including new spells and magic items. And there is one other thing that fans can look for from this book: it is the start of a regular series of books scheduled to release every eight weeks.

"We appreciate the loyal fans of Decipher's RPG properties that have made them an instant hit," Holland said, referring to the 2003 Origins Award ***The Lord of the Rings RPG Core Book*** received for Best New Roleplaying Game. "We feel that the writing, the art, and the playability of Decipher RPGs create a memorable gaming event for them. ***The Lord of the Rings*** is the standard from which all popular fantasy gaming was born so there's a lot of pressure to make sure that we do it right."

Avalon Hill Announces New Releases

No one makes strategy games like Avalon Hill—and the folks at AH don't plan to lose that reputation in 2005. There are three new games and four classic reprints on the horizon for fans, starting in March.

Sword and Skull is a pirate-themed game for three to four players. Using the traditional track formula, the game strives to meld family style fun with Avalon Hill style strategy.

Back under a slightly new name, ***Monsters Menace America*** (formerly ***Monsters Ravage America***) is a great game where you get to play classic b-movie beasts preying on North American cities. At least until the military can finally find a way to destroy them.

More in the vein of classic Avalon Hill, ***Nexus Ops*** is a science-fiction war game about military battling corporations for control of a distant resource-rich planet. Due out in June, ***Nexus Ops*** features stunning art and beautiful game pieces.

Making its way back to shelves—as previously reported in the pages of *CSN*—is *Richard Garfield's* terrific game, ***Roborally***. Finally back in July, ***Roborally*** is a mad race inside a manufacturing plant gone wild.

And, capitalizing on the Vegas-style gaming craze, ***Vegas Showdown*** will arrive this fall. This new game has players using resources to create the most luxurious casino on The Strip.

And they aren't done there. Two old card gar are coming back under the Avalon Hill imprint. Both ***Guillotine*** and ***The Great Dalmuti*** will be back in late spring and early summer.

"Since the early 1950s, the story of Avalon Hill has been inseparably tangled with the history of strategy gaming and, from a larger perspective, the evolution of serious adult gaming in general," said Linda Cox, manager for the Avalon Hill brand at Wizards of the Coast. "The games in our 2005 lineup come from the same great tradition that has made the Avalon Hill brand synonymous with strategy board games for nearly half a century."

The New Hero On The Block

So, what kind of hero are *you* planning to be? The folks at Hero Games can help you live out your dream, with a slew of new releases for the Hero System role-playing game.

In May, Hero will release ***Predators*** and ***The Hero System Equipment Guide***. ***Predators*** ($29.99) is a new enemies book for Hudson City, introducing many new villains that can instantly be inserted into your campaign. Over 250 pages of danger and menace from the mind of Steven S. Long. And ***The Hero System Equipment Guide*** ($24.99) creates a comprehensive list of weapons, gadgets, and gear from existing books—such as ***Dark Champions***, ***Fantasy Hero***, ***Star Hero***, and many more—all updated for the ***Fifth Edition*** rules.

One month later, June brings you ***The Hero System Combat Handbook*** and ***Teen Champions***. Like ***The Hero System Equipment Guide***, ***The Hero System Combat Handbook*** ($24.99) collects combat rules from various sourcebooks, and puts them into one perfect-bound volume. Material from the ***Ultimate*** line of books combines with ***Fantasy Hero***, and even the complete second chapter of the ***Fifth Edition Revised Hero*** rulebook. And for the young and young-at-heart, ***Teen Champions*** ($26.99) is a genre book for the Hero System rules, giving you a setting to not only fight crime, but deal with high school and parents.

Apples To Apples Like The Dodo

It's true. The original ***Apples to Apples*** and all four expansions are no more. Out of the Box has announced that they have retired the game and expansions effective immediately. Before you panic, just realize that, while the originals are gone, the party still continues. That's right, the ***Apples to Apples Party Box*** and the ***Apples to Apples Party Box Expansion*** are now the standards for the game. So, if you have been thinking about purchasing the core game or any expansions in their original form, you had better act quickly or you may just find yourself out of time.

New Schedule For Final Frontier

The ***Star Trek CCG*** saw a big return in 2004. Decipher's re-launch of the game brought out new fans, which continued to grow in the past year. "We're very excited about the ***Star Trek Second Edition CCG*** in 2005," said *Erika Stensvaag*, ***Star Trek Second Edition CCG*** Brand Manager for Decipher. "With two sold-out products in 2004, the long-time fans of this game have spoken, and we've been listening. Our product schedule has lots of surprises in store! And with ***Enterprise*** growing in popularity each season, this is the perfect time to kick the ***Star Trek Second Edition CCG*** up a notch!"

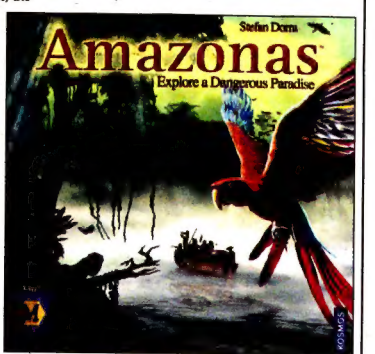
So, after doing her Emeril impression, how does Decipher plan to kick things up? Well, in April they will release ***Strange New Worlds***. This new 120-card expansion introduces the Ferengi as their own complete affiliation, and includes extended art preview cards.

June sees the release of the ***Star Trek Second Edition CCG The Anthology*** set. This boxed volume contains eighteen foil cards from previous sets reprinted with a unique twist.

The latest ***Star Trek*** series, ***Enterprise***, makes its debut in the ***Star Trek CCG*** world with the release of ***To Boldly Go*** in August. Another 120-card set that contains an eighteen card foil sub-set, this release introduces a new game mechanic to increase deck-building and gameplay options dramatically.

And finally, in December comes ***Captain's Log***. Making their ***Second Edition*** debut, the crew of ***Voyager*** joins the game with a new reporting ability in this 120-card set, with an eighteen card sub-set.

Entering its eleventh year, ***Star Trek*** has proven to be a popular and long-lived game system. And with the list of releases planned, it looks like they might make it to the 23rd century themselves.



Journey Down The Amazonas

One of the leaders in the boardgame industry is about to take a trip to the southern hemisphere. ***Amazonas***, the new game designed by *Stephan Dorra* and published by Mayfair Games, pits three to four players against each other as they attempt to navigate the wilds of the Amazon rainforest, moving from village to village to build new outposts. So, why are you in the Amazon in the 19th century? Well, that depends on your sponsor. Each player will have a secret goal to accomplish determined at the beginning of the game. The game is designed to be played in under an hour, and is appropriate for ages ten and up. Look for ***Amazonas*** to reach stores in March for the suggested retail price of $49.00.

L5R v3.0

Shall we try it again? For the third time. ***The Legends of the Five Rings Role-Playing Game*** will make it's way to the gaming shelf. Forsaking the d20 system, the ***Five Rings*** game will return to the Roll and Keep gaming system that started the game back in 1996. AEG has announced that the game will be released this summer, and plans to have sneak previews on their website in the interim.

You thought Jason Blood was a man possessed by Etrigan the Demon.

THINK AGAIN!

BLOOD OF THE DEMON

Plot and pencils by JOHN BYRNE

Script by WILL PFEIFER

Inks by NEKROS

MONTHLY PREMIERING IN MARCH

Comic Shop Locator Service: 1-888-COMIC BOOK or dccomics.com

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